Erdogan's Pivotal Role in the Syrian Crisis. Part 1

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's recent visit to Iran has highlighted once again the delicate balancing act Erdogan is playing in seeking to overthrow the Ba'athist regime in Syria without dragging Turkey into a disastrous regional war. Given that Iran is Turkey's second-largest supplier of gas, Mr. Erdogan cannot afford a conflict with Iran over Syria, despite Mr. Erdogan's inflammatory rhetoric for Western benefit. So one might ask, what does Mr. Erdogan hope to gain from the fall of the Assad regime that justifies the risk he is taking in backing various Syrian rebel groups and lobbying the West to provide military and other assistance to these same groups?

Syria has always been something of an enigma to Western observers and Syrian authorities have worked to keep it that way. It has maintained closer ties to Iran, Russia and former Soviet Socialist republics than to the West, and has steadfastly maintained its bellicose stance towards Israel, even as Egypt and Jordan have engaged in peaceful dialogue. Since 1973, Syria has avoided direct military action against Israel, choosing instead to play a careful behind-the-curtain role, using Lebanon as a proxy state to launch terror operations against Israel while attempting to avoid a full-fledged war. The outside world, especially neighboring Israel, remains somewhat mysterious to the average Syrian without the means to travel to countries with open media access. At the UN crossing on the Golan Heights from Israel into Syria, UN peacekeepers even search the belongings of UN personnel to ensure that nothing with Hebrew writing crosses the checkpoint.

In keeping with Zionist tradition, the Western media has paid most of its attention to Syria in the context of Israel, largely ignoring Syria's northern border with Turkey. For years, the Turkish government built strong ties with Israel and the West was happy to let both countries contain Syria, at least in terms of policy planning in the region. As long as there were no catastrophic events or advertised harboring of international terrorists, Syria has been largely left to its own devices. The human rights of the Syrian people were not at the top of any NATO-member's agenda, least of all the Turkish government's. In fact, for decades the Turkish government was willing to use force to keep Syria in check, and other long-time Turkish enemies, like Greece, cultivated ties with Syria in large part to needle Turkey into committing human rights abuses against Kurds that tarnished Turkey's image internationally.

Turkey has long had problems with its neighbor Syria, with whom it has been at loggerheads over many issues, including but not limited to a longstanding territorial dispute over Turkey's annexation of Hatay province in 1939, and Syria's policy of harboring of Kurdish PKK terrorists, including the now imprisoned PKK leader Abdullah Öcalan. Before Mr. Erdogan came to power, Turkey dealt with the Syria problem by relying on a combination of cooperation with Israel to squeeze Syria on two fronts, while also building huge dams along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers that allow Turkey to control Syrian access to fresh water. In a dry region like the Middle East, control of water sources translates into absolute power, as we have seen in Israel where the government refuses to relinquish control of the West Bank because of the aquifer beneath. Water means survival and is arguably more precious than oil.

The election of the Islamist government of Mr. Erdogan's AKP party in 2002 was a game-changer regarding Syria in terms of objectives and strategy and it seems people are only now waking up to the new reality of Turkish governance and the problems it could cause to Turkey's allies and enemies alike. Before getting involved, the questions we should be asking ourselves are "Why did Erdogan help create and then nurse this Syrian civil war
into the deadly monster it has become? And what precisely does Mr. Erdogan and his cronies hope to gain from the fall of the Assad regime? " If Mr. Erdogan's concerns were truly for the well-being of Syria's population, Mr Erdogan would not promote largely unknown bands of radical, violent, Sunni Islamist rebels to serve as a supposed strong, democratic, ethical replacement for Assad.

To understand Mr. Erdogan's motivation, one needs to understand the challenge Mr. Erdogan faced, and still faces, in attempting to turn Turkey into an Islamic state instead of the secular nation created by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire. With Saudi Arabia responsible for the two holy shrines of Mecca and Medina, and Iran as the primary leader of the Shi'a community, how could Turkey, with its military charged with ensuring the Turkish state identity remained secular, attain credibility as a Muslim leader? The simplest way in the region would be to demonstrate success in promoting Palestinian rights and succeed where the Arabs and Persians had repeatedly failed. After all, for all the wars and rhetoric over the years, the plight of the Palestinians has steadily worsened and the so-called Middle East Peace Process has turned into a "Slow Annexation Of The West Bank Process by Israel". The more the Arabs and Persians scream and threaten to drive the Zionists into the sea, the more hapless they appear and the more the Palestinians lose out. Mr. Erdogan, however, seems to have recognized this failure of the Arabs and Persians as an opportunity to secure Western support in neutralizing the secular Turkish military threat at home, while allowing Mr. Erdogan to move to the forefront in the Muslim world as the Defender of the Palestinians.

Mr. Erdogan's first challenge in becoming a regionally recognized champion of Islamic rights required neutralizing the secular military and removing legal obstacles to Islamicizing the Turkish government. This, Mr. Erdogan achieved by using the prospect of European Union membership to enlist the support of Turkey's sophisticated, secular middle class and its powerful business community. Mr. Erdogan knew that even the most secular Turkish billionaire would petition to reduce the military's role as guarantor of Turkey's secularism if it meant Turkey could become a member of the European Union. The European Union requires that its members allow free practice of religion. It seemed to many Western-oriented, secular Turks that if the military insistence on cracking down on free speech was preventing Turkish entry into the European Union, it made sense to remove the military's overbearing control. They did not envision the power that removing the military would give to Mr. Erdogan. It simply did not seem possible to most Turks that Mr. Erdogan would have the means and support to unstitch the incredible influence of Atatürk from the fabric of Turkish society and replace the previous authoritarian secular regime with a new authoritarian Islamic regime. Nor did most believe that Mr. Erdogan might not be truly committed to Turkey's European Union membership, but might merely be using the accession process to gain Western support in neutralizing his secular domestic opposition.

(to be continued)

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